

Last Wednesday the Pentagon released its official "Request for Proposal" (RFP), laying out the requirements for a new aircraft to replace the Air Force's aging fleet of KC-135 aerial tankers.

The Defense Department's announcement is important for not only creating up to 1,500 jobs in our area if contractor Northrop Grumman/EADS were to win the bidding, but also for equipping our military personnel with a next generation aerial tanker capable of accommodating the most challenging missions.

In short, the long-awaited RFP was a profound disappointment. Its minimalist approach will yield a tanker that is hardly better than the existing outmoded fleet and is a bad investment for the taxpayer.

If the Air Force's current air tanker were an automobile, it would likely qualify for an antique tag in Alabama. First deployed when Ike was in the White House, the KC-135 has long ago fallen behind in keeping pace with a military more reliant than ever upon air power and the ability to project that power faster and farther.

Our commanders in the field and at the Pentagon do agree that the KC-135 needs to go. But what should replace it?

We have two choices.

An aircraft design that is slightly better than the Eisenhower-era KC-135, or a completely new aircraft with greater size, range and state-of-the-art capabilities.

With our military's need for greater mobility, you would think that the Pentagon would want the most advanced and versatile aerial tanker it could get and challenge the bidders to produce that aircraft for the best price. Not so.

Laying aside the argument that the Pentagon has forfeited quality in its quest to replace the KC-135, it's troubling that defense officials would structure their RFP to match the offering of one of the bidders - Boeing. Northrop Grumman has previously stated it would not participate in a competition with a predetermined outcome, creating the potential for a sole-source contract award.

The Obama administration has taken an early position against sole-source, non competitive government contracts. The administration should back up its policy with action and ensure that a \$40 billion, 35-year defense contract does not become a sole-source contract. In such a case, both our military and the taxpayers will lose.

Health Care Theater:

Blair House, across from the White House, was the backdrop for President Obama's health care drama last Thursday, but frankly, the stage at the Kennedy Center would have been more appropriate.

Going into the so-called health care summit, we conservatives felt that the president was more interested in showmanship than working to find fundamental areas of agreement to reform health care without radical change.

Rather than starting with a blank sheet of paper as conservatives have requested, the president trotted out a repackaged health care bill that contained many of the same government mandates as the previously-passed Senate health care bill.

I was not invited to the summit, but the Republican leadership did attend. It was important that conservatives show up to present a united front for the majority of Americans who do not wish to see either the House or Senate health care bills, or a version of the two, passed into law.

If the president and his leadership in Congress want to talk about real health care reform based on market reforms and increased choice without more government intervention, conservatives are willing to talk. Unfortunately, it appears the president is even more determined to force his government-controlled health care bill through Congress.

Toyota Fairness:

Toyota has recently come under fire for problems with the braking systems on some of its cars.

Watching the media frenzy and the political piling on that has surrounded the issue, I feel it's time to take a deep breath.

We in Alabama share a particularly close relationship with the car manufacturer. In addition to many Alabama Toyota dealers who provide valuable local jobs, Omni World Limited, the distributor for Toyota automobiles for five southeastern states, has a customer service center in Mobile, employing 375 people.

In Huntsville, Toyota manufactures V-6 and V-8 engines for Tacomas and Sequoias.

Over 860 Alabamians are employed in that facility which plans to add another 240 jobs in the near future.

Toyota has a solid reputation as a reliable auto manufacturer going back many decades. I believe no other automobile manufacturing company has addressed safety concerns in such a comprehensive matter by not only recalling vehicles and stopping sales, but also voluntarily halting production until these concerns can be addressed.

Toyota should be commended for its efforts, not bashed by demagoging politicians trying to score political points.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.